Turkish dams on Euphrates and Tigris: A water dilemma for Iraq

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Iraq's water crisis is intensifying as Turkish dams curb water flows to the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers

Salah Nasrawi , Sunday 4 Feb 2018

Iraqi residents must wade through a lake of water due to a main break (Photo: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)

Over centuries, the civilisation of ancient Mesopotamia grew up along the banks of two mighty rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, whose flood deposits left the southern plains of what is now Iraq with the richest soil in the Middle East.

Now, for the first time millions of Iraqis who rely upon these two great rivers to provide drinking water, agricultural irrigation, power generation and transportation fear a potential threat to this lifeline upon which Iraq depends.

Water supply is increasingly becoming key to the outcome of other conflicts in Iraq as the control of rivers and dams has become a major weapon for Turkey, Iraq's powerful neighbour, which already wields great influence in Iraqi politics.

Water shortages in southern Iraq are believed to be behind an increasing rate of aridity and severe desertification that according to lawmakers has reached some 70 per cent in some southern and central provinces of Iraq.

While Turkey takes a large share of the blame for the water crisis of the two rivers, the Iraqi authorities are also partly responsible for the crisis. Iraq has no national water strategy to tackle the dramatic shortage that affects up to 90 per cent of the country.

Most of the water meandering down the lower reaches of the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers comes from the Turkish highlands where Ankara is building a large-scale irrigation and water-management project.

Water levels in the two rivers fell further in recent months amid Turkey's preparations to fill the massive Ilisu Dam, one of more than a dozen dams built by Ankara as part of its Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), which is one of the biggest irrigation and electrical power schemes in the world.

The controversial construction on the Tigris is the largest hydroelectric power project in Turkey. It was initiated in 1997 and is reportedly close to completion.

Since 1990, when the Euphrates was closed for 90 days to fill the reservoir of the Ataturk Dam, Iraq has been raising the alarm over Turkey's plans, which it says will threaten water supplies that have fed Iraq's agriculture and economy for thousands of years.

Turkish leaders including President Recep Tayyep Erdogan have repeatedly assured Iraqi officials that no harm will be inflicted on Iraq when the filling of the dams begins. But no concrete steps have been taken to mitigate the low water levels in the lower Tigris and Euphrates Rivers caused by the Turkish projects.

Last month, Iraq's Foreign Ministry said government officials had told visiting Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu that his government should postpone the start of the filling of the Dam in March 2018 and take measures to raise the flow of water in the Tigris.

Nevertheless, Çavuşoğlu failed to mention if he had discussed the water crisis with his Iraqi counterparts during his visit to Baghdad. A post on the Turkish Foreign Ministry Website said Çavuşoğlu had emphasised "the common determination to further develop bilateral trade" during the meeting.

Ankara started building the GAP as a massive hydroelectric and irrigation project consisting of 22 dams and 19 hydroelectric power plants on both the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers close to the Syrian and Iraqi borders.

The ambition is to make Turkey an agricultural power by irrigating approximately 1.7 million hectares of land. The project is also expected to generate some 27 billion kWh of hydroelectric power on an annual basis.

Tensions between Iraq and Turkey have risen since 1975 as Turkey's dam and hydropower constructions on the two rivers have cut water to Iraq by 80 per cent, jeopardising agriculture and natural habitats in the country.

Iraqi Minister of Water Resources Hassan Al-Jannabi told the Website Foreign Policy Concepts on 7 January that the decline in water inflows to Iraq had been dramatic, disclosing that the average annual flow in the last 10 years had been equivalent to 45 per cent of the long-term average in the Tigris-Euphrates River Basin.

The Iraqi media has been full of reports in recent weeks of the water scarcity in the country's southern provinces that has forced farmers to abandon planting this winter's wheat crop.

The shortage of water in the rivers accompanied by low rainfall has negatively affected agricultural land, rivers, lakes, livestock and the environment and led to desertification in many parts of Iraq.

The drought has devastated farming and grazing land in large parts of the south of the country, displacing hundreds of thousands of people and fuelling resentment.

In some cities such as Basra, high salinity caused by a shortage of fresh river water has affected drinking water supplies, leading to increasing anger.

Under a 1986 deal with Turkey, Ankara agreed to allow 500 cubic metres of water per second to enter Iraq from the Tigris and a similar amount to enter the Euphrates shared by Iraq and Syria.

The two countries are bound by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which recognised the nation-state of modern Turkey and drew up its borders with Iraq and other Arab countries.

According to the treaty, a commission was to be formed of Turkey, Syria and Iraq aiming to resolve possible disputes raised by hydraulic projects. Ankara was also required to inform Iraq of any new planned infrastructure along the rivers.

A friendship treaty signed between the two countries in 1946 included a protocol aimed at regulating the use of the water of the Euphrates and Tigris. In 1980, a Joint Technical Committee on Regional Water was established by Iraq and Turkey to deal with water issues.

Subsequent Turkish governments have ignored Turkey's obligations under these agreements and brushed aside Iraq's calls to settle the dispute on the GAP dams project.

Turkish officials have always taken a hard line on Iraqi and Syrian demands for water-sharing. When the Ataturk Dam was inaugurated in 1992, then Turkish president Suleyman Demirel said neither Syria nor Iraq could lay claim to Turkey's water, any more than Turkey could claim Arab oil.

"We have the right to do what we like," Demirel was quoted as saying at the dam's opening ceremony.

Turkey has been contemplating selling water to countries having a short supply such as Israel. In 2006, Israel and Turkey reportedly agreed on a "water for arms" deal, under which millions of gallons of fresh water would be shipped in giant tankers across the Eastern Mediterranean and into Israeli ports.

Another agreement was reportedly signed in 2015, under which water would be transported through a pipeline laid under the Mediterranean Sea, then pass through Turkish-controlled Northern Cyprus, and then on to Israel.

Turkey already delivers water by tanker to Northern Cyprus, and it wants to sell water to Malta, Southern Cyprus and Crete. It has also held talks on selling water to Jordan.

Turkey has been manipulating the present regional instability to further its agenda in the crisis-ridden Middle East, including by pursuing its ambitious plans to be a regional "water superpower" that could give it main control over the region's waters.

Although most of Turkey's efforts take place in Iraq, which has a finite water supply from the Euphrates and Tigris, the Baghdad government remains unprepared to confront the Turkish plans.

Undoubtedly, Baghdad is distracted by too many conflicts at home to be able to face up to the threat of water scarcity. The war on terror, Kurdish separatism, communal violence, low oil prices, weak governance and corruption have all been obstacles preventing Baghdad from working out effective water-management plans to deal with the growing threats.

However, the Iraqi government has also demonstrated poor diplomacy in responding to the Turkish challenge. While pursuing peaceful means to deal with the water crisis remains a prudent approach, Iraq risks being taken off guard, giving Turkey free rein to boost its standing on the water issue.

Unless Iraq's political elite outgrows its narrow, ethnically based and self-centred politics and tries to regain the country's soft power, Iraq will continue to lose out on the water policy front with Turkey.

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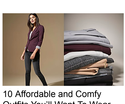

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